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An Insightful Interview with a Leading Indian Linguist, Professor Karunakaran

One of the editors of Language in India www.languageinindia.com, Professor K. Karunakaran, was recently interviewed by *The Hindu*, Chennai, <http://www.hindu.com/2008/07/28/stories/2008072853640500.htm>.

Dr. Karunakaran was Vice-Chancellor of Tamil University, before he moved to the South Asian Studies section of the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where he teaches Tamil and pursues his research in Dravidian linguistics and other linguistic disciplines. Earlier, Dr. Karunakaran was the founder Chair and Professor of Linguistics at Bharathiar University, Coimbatore.

A graduate of the Center for Advanced Studies in Linguistics, Annamalai University, he initially taught at the Center and successfully guided and supervised the doctoral dissertations of more than a dozen scholars in that Center. It was always amazing to see how he managed his time to do all his writings while guiding dozens of scholars for their Ph.D. in linguistics and related disciplines at Bharathiar University.

A Crusade in Favor of Teaching the Correct Structure of Indian Languages

The interview stated that Dr. Karunakaran did not stop “crusading for the cause of teaching the correct structure of the Tamil language.” Leading linguists like Dr. Karunakaran have always argued in favor of using appropriate methods for teaching Tamil and other Indian languages, and for the re-orientation of the focus of the Tamil syllabus at all levels of education.

Diglossic Problems and Learning and Using Tamil

Tamil poses a rather difficult challenge because of its diglossic nature, Karunakaran has argued in several of his writings. The gap between the spoken and written varieties has been in existence for many centuries, for more than at least 1000 years. And this can be easily proved through evidence offered by the inscriptions dating back to AD 900.

Spread of English and Diglossia

Diglossic problems have increased and taken on much more complex dimensions for the last 50 years with the spread of and desire for education through the medium of English. Borrowing from English is abundant in the spoken variety, cutting across the regional,

social and economic strata as well as any sort of medium of communication. Until recently the general tendency was to use mainly words from the Tamil language on formal occasions. However, the sluice is now open and there does not seem to be any way we can stop the use of borrowed English words in both written and spoken language. People have begun to lose touch with Tamil vocabulary even for common items and processes, and this tendency that has begun with the spoken variety is impacting the written forms of communication as well.

Writing in Tamil

Even before this influx of borrowed words began, linguistics scholars like Dr. Karunakaran had pointed that the problems that we face in writing Tamil are manifold.

Problems with the pronunciation of the lateral sounds in Tamil have led to spelling confusion in the minds of both teachers and their students. Speakers of various regional and social dialects of Tamil are notorious for their utter inability to recognize and use the differences that exist between these laterals in speech. And this has affected their spelling as well in writing.

Likewise there are two trills, both of which are pronounced alike by almost every Tamil speaker except that small but significant population from Kanyakumari district of Tamilnadu. Difference between these trills in writing is crucial to distinguish between scores of minimal pairs, most of which are still currently used in writing and in common speech. In other words, we see a paradoxical situation: words have become homophonous at their pronunciation level, but have to be written with different spelling in order to maintain meaning differences in writing. And unfortunately most of these words are commonly used and their meaning can be distinguished only inadequately by the context in which they are used. There is also a question of upsetting the feelings of many when the wrong trill letter is used to write words. It is offensive in Tamil writing to refer to a person from the MaRavar community as a person from the Maravar community. *Saiva samaya kuravar* refers to Saivite religious saints, whereas if some one writes *Saiva samaya kuRavar* Shiva worshippers will be offended.

There are six nasals in Tamil, and each one of these is represented by a distinct letter in Tamil script. In particular, there is an overlap between the alveolar, retroflex and dental nasals in speech. And this leads to confusion in the choice of nasal letters in writing. But graphemic distinctions are absolutely necessary if many words using these nasals have to be distinguished by their meanings.

Script reforms in Tamil have not taken care of these problems.

Focus on Cultural Context of a Language

The interview reported a very interesting observation of Dr. Karunakaran:

“Every year new terms were being introduced. Such terms needed to be translated in the right cultural context, he said. “Language should always go with culture. If language is not context-restricted, it can be used in the wrong manner. Universal structure of all languages is the same. Only the surface structure is different. Hence, the manifestation should be done in the right manner.”

At present, according to the report of the interview by Amudha Kannan, Dr. Karunakaran is working on a project “Politeness and Address Terms in Dravidian Languages.” We look forward to the completion of this project.

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